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# OUR SCHOOLS

The Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

# OUR SELVES

## CONSTELLATIONS OF BLACK RADICAL IMAGINING

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## BLACK ARTS AND POPULAR EDUCATION

Art, Memories &  
The Grenada Revolution

Their Borders  
Crossed Us

Loving As Resistance









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# Constellations of Black Radical Imagining: Black Arts and Popular Education

*Dayaxa haddii fa waayo xiddigahaa lagu guuraa*

*If the moon is not shining, one uses the stars to help one move*

Xiddidka ilaa xidigaha, from root to star, is a Somali saying that is invoked to welcome and prepare you for a story that spans the distance between a root in the ground and a star in the sky. It is central to the creation of this special issue of *Our Schools/Our Selves*.

*Constellations of Black Radical Imagining: Black Arts and Popular Education* is a collective response to the demonstrable lack of educational resources that focus on and speak to continental and diasporic<sup>1</sup> African communities on Turtle Island.<sup>2</sup> It explores how Blackness has shaped the ways in which we as African educators, cultural producers, curators and guest editors of this issue imagine and relate to notions of learning, knowledge production and popular education.

Throughout the work done by us and other African educators and cultural producers invested in the freedom of African communities globally, it has become clear that educational and learning systems are crucial areas in the struggles for liberation. By situating this issue at the intersections of cultural production and popular education, *Constellations of Black Radical Imagining: Black Arts and Popular Education* is to be understood as a literary and visual contribution to the on-going discussions of how to support global African struggles for self-determination. In order to ensure education is relevant for our

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communities we must reshape our conceptions of it by making our stories and lived experiences the foundations from which we work. Every article, every piece of poetry, every typeset, every capitalized letter, every image, every article and essay in this issue does just that by telling a particular story about what it means to creatively reimagine learning in Black communities.

*From root to star.*

In *Indict the System: Indigenous and Black Connected Resistance*<sup>3</sup>, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson refers to Indigenous and Black struggles as “decolonial constellations of resistance.” Each piece in this special issue is a point in the ever-forming constellations of Black radical imagining. The stories, essays, articles, visual art and poetry are a contribution to the on-going and vibrant legacy of radical Black cultural production that have at their base been about creatively learning and unlearning, resistance and liberation.

As guest editors we are committed to popular education, which is the process of collaboratively unearthing peoples’ knowledges and critical reflections on issues in their community in order to fight for liberation. As a result, this issue explores a variety of questions including: What is the relationship between art, storytelling, and the continued resistance of Black communities? How do Black communities and Indigenous communities in Turtle Island co-conspire to decolonize and build new learning models filled with visions of freedom? What does it mean to be free? What are the connections between Black decolonial cultural production and liberation movements?

The Black Arts Movement was founded in 1965, making 2015 its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary. It was triggered by the assassination of Malcolm X, and was made up of a loose network of poets, writers, musicians, and visual artists. “The Black Arts Movement is radically opposed to any concept of the artist that alienates him from his community. This movement is the aesthetic and spiritual sister of the Black Power concept.”<sup>4</sup> In order to resist the active marginalization of Blackness by systems of white supremacy, the Black Arts Movement inserted

a Black Power perspective into existing mainstream educational canons while also contributing to, and inspiring, the building of new learning structures that centered a Black perspective. This issue is an ode to our elders and ancestral warriors who have laid the foundations that this issue is building upon.

The urgency of the topics that this issue is immersed in cannot be lost. Over the last year in response to, among other things, Black people being murdered every 28 hours by police officers, security guards and vigilantes in the United States<sup>5</sup>, and the tactics of the Toronto and other Canadian police departments that racially profile and murder Black people<sup>6</sup>, Black communities across geographies in Turtle Island have taken to the streets en masse to defend Black life from sanctioned State violence by every means necessary. Mainstream educational institutions throughout Turtle Island are not exempt from these systemic injustices. With the increasing militarization of educational spaces we are seeing schools replicate broader systemic patterns of racist exploitation that target Black peoples, culminating in the phenomenon that is often referred to as the “school to prison pipeline.” Furthermore, the curricula within these educational institutions actively marginalize the histories of Africans while sanitizing the little that youth are taught about African history to fit within frameworks that serve white supremacy.

*Constellations of Black Radical Imagining: Black Arts and Popular Education* defies the attempted sanitization, erasure and marginalization of our histories. It is an ode to Black life, a historical recounting, and an act of radical imagining: a subversive space that resists violence and occupation in a country built on the continued colonization and exploitation of Indigenous territories and African bodies. As guest editors, our approach goes beyond solely exploring the marginalization of and violence inflicted upon African peoples by systems: in the spirit of the Black Arts Movement, and other Pan-African arts movements, the contributors to this issue provide examples of the ways in which Black communities throughout Turtle Island have and continue to build knowledges and learning models, frameworks and institutions that respond to the needs of Black community building.

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We begin this issue with the cover art, titled *Rooted*, where Afuwa depicts "... the model unclothed, unashamed, watchful and strong" as a signaling of the power that the Black woman holds despite the violence that is inflicted on her personhood. In a world where Black life is under constant attack, this image invites us into the issue by reminding us and holding us in the truth that Black bodies "are indisputably precious" (Artist Statement).

*From root to star.*

In *Resisting Inclusion: Decolonial Relations between Peoples of Afrikan Descent & Indigenous Peoples*, Rainos 'Moyo' Mutamba explores the complexities of African and Indigenous solidarity on occupied Indigenous lands. Mutamba asks readers to rethink what it means when we as Africans desire to be written into Canadian history, considering the broader contexts of colonialism and oppression. This piece is an anchor that raises practical and theoretical questions through its analysis of the continued negotiations between Black and Indigenous communities, a theme that surfaces throughout the issue.

*Home: a time and space.*

Several of the pieces in this issue look at the physical and temporal ways in which Black communities consider the idea of home; a place to imagine and dream, a space of resistance, and a place that remains elusive even as it is present. Bishara Mohamed and Ashai Nicholas in *A Tale in Two Parts* invoke a traditional Somali call-and-response method of collaborative storytelling. They explore how stories build ideas of who we are, how stories create land as land creates stories, and what it means to be of a diaspora and to live in a transitional space, straddling both sides of an imposed boundary caused by displacement. Nicholas and Mohamed's piece is about reclamation and power: who holds it, and who doesn't. Nadijah Robinson's visual art piece *How to Go Home (a lie)* serves as an important starting point to a discussion about the role and importance of art in creating and revealing home. Afuwa and Juliane Okot Bitek write *Rooted: The Diaspora Playlist* as a visual and literary mixtape that plays us through

the contradictions of displacement, the power of Black women and the cartography of searching for community. For *A Tale in Two Parts, How to Go Home (a lie)* and *Rooted: The Diaspora Playlist* storytelling is a site of resistance, the place where story itself moves from the metaphor to the material. *Rooted: The Diaspora Playlist* is structured as an interactive roadmap where readers are provided a list of artistic objects they are then asked to seek out. This journey of discovery, between metaphor and material, makes storytelling such a critical component of popular education. It is through a politically conscious undertaking of storytelling that our histories get passed from generation to generation.

*Change is us.*

Several articles examine how popular education tools — poetry, visual art and narrative — are key to community-building. Délice Mugabo's *In Ntozake Shange's Words: Sexual Violence Against Black Women, Organizing for Transformative Justice, and Finding My Way as Black Feminist* uses narrative and poetry as a device to re-imagine Black community learning and organizing. Ntozake Shange's poem *With No Immediate Cause* is used as the inspiration for a collaborative video project; it also becomes a starting point in a discussion of how an explicitly Black feminist perspective has shaped the author's evolving political viewpoints, particularly with regard to her work in highlighting and resisting the silence surrounding gender-based violence in Black communities. It is from love that Mugabo writes. Safia Siad in her three-poem collection titled *Loving as Resistance* echoes Mugabo's sentiments, reminding us that transformative love is crucial to the survival of our movements, and inspires us to document and preserve our stories. Amanda Parris' *Document It Before We Forget: A Conversation with African-Canadian Women Artists on the Canadian Black Arts Movement* examines different facets of Black cultural production and education over the last 30 years. She speaks with prominent artists, educators and writers who emphasize the importance and value of the preservation of a localized Black Arts Movement because without it, "Black artists have and continue to run the very real danger of reinventing wheels already proven to be unworkable." Black communities must continue to document past

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experiences or risk being unable to build, nourish, and sustain more strategic pathways to resistance.

*Moving out of the gaps: building Black learning institutions.*

Syrus Marcus Ware, d'bi young anitafrika, Rania El Mugammar and Valerie Mason-John examine how socio-political environments create educational barriers that silence and marginalize Blackness, and how these barriers are being confronted by Black communities. Ware's visual exploration through his three-part series *Their Borders Crossed Us* is a painful reminder of the ways in which Black bodies are frequently transgressed, exploited and murdered but also an affirmation that Black bodies are sites of hope and survival. Mason-John's *Black Before February* and El Mugammar's collection of poems provide an important reminder that while there has never been a shortage of Black artists, thinkers and movement makers engaged in the creation of quality and timely work, this talent and content remains largely unused in mainstream non-Black educational systems; for example, the majority of provinces have refused to incorporate Mason-John's critically-acclaimed co-written anthology *The Great Black North — Contemporary African Canadian Poetry* into their curriculums. In response to the gaps that Mason-John and El Mugammar highlight, d'bi.young anitafrika's *art(is)t integrity: dubpoetry, storytelling, and arts education for Black communities* profiles the author's years of work in building Black community-based educational institutions with and for Black communities.

*Weaving: community and memory.*

The articles in the final part of the issue highlight the value of lived experiences in storytelling and, subsequently, popular education. dione c. haynes, Hawa Y. Mire, MJ, Komi Olaf and Kimalee Phillip consider how lived experiences shape the ways in which Black communities weave together histories, memories, and current experiences to build community, the ultimate purpose of popular education. dione c. haynes' poem *gleaming precious things* and Hawa Y. Mire's creative fiction *Black Woman, Everybody's Healer* explore the relationships of and between Black women in all of their

complications, nuances, difficulties and softness. The specificity of these relationships between Black women is often ignored as part of larger Black community dialogues, and Mire's and haynes' work, similarly to Mugabo's, explicitly centre a Black feminist perspective. Tying together the ways in which popular education is both an experience and process, MJ in *Fragments: In Search of Antecedents* takes us on a journey of self and community discovery alongside the likes of June Jordan, Zora Neale Hurston, and queer Black women from East Africa. Also in this vein, Komi Olaf's visual *Cross-Section of the Afro-Puff* expresses a desire for sustained intra-communal dialogue amongst continental and diasporic African youth. His work makes clear that only through interactions that hold and honour all of the members of African communities can this take place. Finally, we end with Kimalee Philip's article *Art, Memories & The Grenada Revolution*. In this piece Phillip analyses how the Grenadian revolution was supported through the intersection of cultural production and popular education while cautioning us, as Parris did earlier, against failing to do the archival work necessary that will keep the experiences and learnings of past movements present and accessible for generations to come.

Xiddidka ilaa xidigaha, from root to star, our stories hold power and memory.

Together, with courage, militant love, and vision we need to tell our stories, for they are the foundation for how we can imagine learning that is steeped in liberation. We need to create and maintain educational spaces that are accountable, unequivocally grounded in consent, imaginative and responsive to the needs of our communities. This collection is dedicated to all Africans struggling for freedom.

In Unity and Struggle,

Luam Kidane and Hawa Y. Mire

### ENDNOTES

1. Diasporic is the act of living as part of a diaspora, a physical and imaginative space for Africans living outside of the Continent.
2. Turtle Island is the name used by several Indigenous nations to refer to the continent dubbed North America by colonizers.
3. (2014). Retrieved from <http://leannesimpson.ca/indict-the-system-indigenous-black-connected-resistance/>
4. Larry Neals (1968), *The Black Arts Movement*. Drama Review Vol. 12, No. 4
5. Malcolm X Grassroots Movement (2012), *Operation Ghetto Storm*. Retrieved from <http://www.operationghettostorm.org/>
6. Refer to: Fact Sheet on Police Violence against the African Community in Canada by Ajamu Nangwaya (<http://toronto.mediacoop.ca/blog/ajamu-nangwaya/18378>) and to an investigative report by the *Toronto Star* titled "Known to Police" ([http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/known\\_topolice/singled-out.html#](http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/known_topolice/singled-out.html#))